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ABSTRACT

The central feature of language is symbolic meaning, and the act of reading is a part of the symbolic process that characterizes human life. Meaning occurs as a result of interpretation in a context, not as a result of response or reaction. Signs have a literal meaning in a specific context, while symbols have a figurative meaning in an implicit context of metaphor. A question of principle--how does what we read mean?--and a question of practice--how can reading be made meaningful?--may be posed. Perhaps the teaching of reading comes down to making reading more interesting and less tough. Two half-truths about meaning should be dispelled: that text has a single meaning and, at the opposite extreme, that a text means anything any reader wants to claim. In fact, meaning is not "in" anything because it is not a thing but a happening or process. To make reading meaningful, teachers can involve readers in decisions about text, after facilitating the connections on which meaning is built by asking questions. Their questions should be designed to elicit divergent and creative thinking and to build the curiosity and interest that might make reading more interesting and less tough. (Illustrative discussion questions are posed about a familiar nursery rhyme.) (GT)

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The Paradox of Text:

Will the real meaning please identify itself?

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The Paradox of Text: Will the real meaning please identify itself?

According to the prevailing theory of learning on which most pedagogy is based, the reading act occurs in somewhat the following way: a competent language user sees a word in print, for example the word ball, to which he responds by thinking, roughly at least, the same thing the writer of the word had in mind when he wrote the word. This conception treats the word as if it were a sign for an idea, much as John Locke, the father of empiricism, argued in 1689. The essence of the process is not particularly different from any of the following:

1) Charred scars on old tree trunks are a sign which we take to mean there was once a forest fire here.

2) A faint light across the eastern sky is a sign which means dawn is near.

3) A buzzer sounded in the presence of Pavlov's dog is a sign which means food may be presented.

4) The word ball uttered with appropriate intonation in the presence of my dog is a sign meaning to him he is to hunt for his rubber ball.

In each of these cases, one thing, a sign of one sort or another, is taken to mean another thing with which it is naturally or artificially associated. It was Locke's contention

that words were "marks for the ideas within (the) mind, whereby they might be made known to others, and the thoughts of men's minds be conveyed from one to another [John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, III, 1, ii]." The psychological theory which explains the process is behaviorism, which, as Percy (1978) says, "both in its early Pavlovian and Watsonian versions, does indeed offer a (complete) model of language as phenomenon, which meets all the specifications of explanatory theory except one: It is wrong [p. 303]." (I acknowledge a debt to Walker Percy on whose ideas I have drawn heavily in these introductory comments.)

I raise this issue not as an attack on empiricism or behaviorism. (For that one might turn to Chomsky's (1959) devastating review of Skinner's Verbal Behavior or, more recently and in a different mode, to Weiner and Palermo's (1974) Cognition and the Symbolic Processes.) My purpose here is to point out that the behaviorist's central assumption is that language is explainable as an empirically observable "series of space-time events" and that on this ground the theory as a theory of language, as Percy goes on to say, is wrong primarily because it "ignores the central feature of human language [p. 153]." This central feature is symbolic meaning, and by whatever reasoning we may try to understand the act of reading, we surely will want to see it as a part of the symbolic process which characterizes the form of life of

human beings. Language, spoken or written, does not "mean" because it directs our attention to something (objects, ideas, or whatever) with which it is associated. Meaning in language arises because it is "embedded in the complex web of cognitive relations that constitute human knowledge and understanding (and is understandable only) within the larger context of the intentional framework of human knowledge and conceptual discourse [Weiner, 1974, p. 422]."

Meaning occurs, or is occasioned, as a result of interpretation in a context, not as a result of response or reaction. Words have no meaning outside of their use in a context of discourse. Weimer puts it this way: "The strong claim of the cognitive theorist...is that there is no meaning or knowledge in language per se .... No matter how it is formulated, this is a striking claim, the full import of which is liable to remain obscure for some time... The problem is to follow where it leads [p. 424]." One of my purposes in this paper is to follow that lead toward a certain conceptual and pedagogical perspective on reading.

The distinction between meaning from sign and meaning from symbol is important to the characterization of language on which much of my argument will rest. Wherever linguistic meaning is, it is not in the association of words with objects or ideas since words are not associated with objects or ideas

outside of language in use. The charred bark and Pavlov's buzzer are associated with events in space and time because in some space and time they were causally or necessarily linked. That is what makes them signs of those events). But the words charred bark and fire, buzzer and salivation are not linked to one another or to anything else in any causal or necessary way; their relationship is a part of the language in which they are used, a part of the intentional framework of human knowledge and conceptual discourse." As Richard Anderson (1977) says, "text is gobbledygook unless the reader possesses an interpretive framework to breathe meaning into it [p. 423]."

Another way to put this is to say that signs have a literal meaning in a specific context of reference while symbols have a figurative meaning in an implicit context of metaphor. (This implies, accurately I think, that language is essentially metaphoric. See Ricoeur, 1974-75, "Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics.") To put the matter of meaning in these terms, it seems to me, is to define language (reading, listening, writing, speaking) as an instance of the symbolic function of which human beings are capable. The result is to focus our concern in reading (or any other linguistic phenomenon) on the central issue of language: symbolic or metaphoric meaning. In pedagogical terms this will translate to the question of how we can, as teachers, make

reading meaningful for students trying to learn to read. (In this perspective, a distinction between learning to read and reading to learn makes no sense.) When Frank Smith (1973) admonishes, "To make learning to read easy,... make reading easy [p. 195]," he says that to do so one must understand the reading process and what the reader is trying to do. Both the process and the act rest on the issue of meaning, I believe. The reader is trying to interpret meaning, and that interpretation is the process of reading. And yet such a statement is hardly enlightening pedagogically. There are two necessary further steps: 1) to examine and formulate as clearly as one can the nature of meaning and how it occurs, and 2) to try to conclude or justify from that what we as teachers might do, specifically, to facilitate the occurence of meaning.

Perhaps it would be useful to transform these into questions: How does what we read mean? and How can reading be made meaningful? Our answers to these two questions will be closely related. My major purpose in this paper will be not simply to provide possible answers to these questions but, in the process of exploring various answers, to coalesce the questions as different ways of asking essentially the same thing.

The first question is one of principle, the second is one of practice. The questions are deliberately juxtaposed in order to suggest a logical relationship between their answers.

Whatever we might do to teach reading must be grounded in a carefully formulated conception of the nature of meaning, given that a large part of what it is to teach reading is to make reading meaningful, as I have argued.

It is not as if the question of meaning were new. Semantics is as old as philosophy, and modern psychological conceptions of meaning in reading ("The process of comprehension is taken to be identical to the process of selecting and verifying conceptual schemata to account for the situation (or text) to be understood [Rumelhart, 1977, p. 268.]") find their roots in the psychology of memory advanced by Sir Frederick Bartlett in 1932. Bartlett's thesis is found in a frequently quoted passage from Remembering (1932):

> It is fitting to speak of every human cognitive reaction--perceiving, imaging, remembering, thinking, and reasoning--as an effort after meaning.... When we try to discover how this is done we find that always it is by an effort to connect what is given with something else [p. 44].

Notice that all of the human cognitive reactions of which Bartlett speaks are involved in reading. The major issues in teaching reading hinge on the matter of meaning and the effort to make connections in the "context of the intentional framework of human knowledge and conceptual discourse," might Bartlett as well as Weimer have said. Reading is an effort after meaning, the success of which depends on appropriate connections.

In a recent rereading of one of my favorite novels, I found one of my favorite literary characters making a comment about reading which bears on the question of teaching reading. The character, and the book by the same title, is Huckleberry Finn, and this about half way through the book during the time Huck is briefly living with the Grangerford family, a family of some high culture, you may recall:

> This table had a cover made out of beautiful oil-cloth, with a red and blue spread-eagle painted on it, and a painted border all around. It came all the way from Philadelphia, they said. There was some books too, piled up perfectly exact, on each corner of the table. One was a big family Bible, full of pictures. One was Pilgrim's Progress, about a man that left his family it didn't say why. I read considerable in it now and then. The statements was interesting, but tough.

Interesting, but tough. Isn't it so with much of what we read? There's a key here, I think, to our problems in teaching reading. Perhaps the teaching of reading comes down to making reading more interesting and less tough. Make reading easy. Not necessarily what is read, but the act of reading, that is, and to insure that, one must be as certain as possible that anything a student is asked to read is something he or she can read and will want to read (Estes and Johnstone, 1977). I say this out of a conviction that the effort after meaning is motivated by curiosity (or what Huck calls interest) coupled with a belief that the curiosity

may be satisfied. Two things are needful, and they relate to making reading more interesting and less tough, to wanting to read and being able to read: there must be an arousal of curiosity and there must be something to be read which has a real and perceived potential of satisfying that curiosity.

Before we pursue possible answers to the questions of principle and practice, there are further issues to deal with concerning meaning, though. The paradox of text referred to in the title of this paper is related to two myths about meaning, half truths, actually, which stand between us and any resolution of the issue of meaning.

The first half truth is that meaning is in what is read. The problem with this account and the reason it is only half true is that it leads to the absurdity that text has a meaning waiting to be found by good readers exactly, or nearly so, as the author intended. This is not to deny either that there is meaning or that authors intend, but to suggest that rather than intend a meaning authors intend to mean. The distinction is not trivial. It is the point John Ciardi (1959) is making in his very useful book, How Does a Poem Mean, for example. Taking a page from Ciardi, I am thus led to ask not "What does what we read mean "but rather "How does what we read mean?" From Ciardi: "What does the poem mean? is too often a self-destroying approach to poetry....What the poem is is inseparable from its own performance of itself. The dance is in the dancer and the

dancer is in the dance. Or put in another way: where is the 'dance' when no one is dancing it? and what man is a 'dancer' except when he is dancing? [p. 668]." Of any text, where is the "meaning" when there is no one to whom it means?

But this line of reasoning can lead to an opposite extreme, a second half truth which is that meaning is in the reader, or perhaps in the writer. This leads to the absurdity that any text means anything any reader wants to claim, or, to use an example from Wittgenstein (1953), that one might say "'bububu' and mean 'If it doesn't rain I shall go for a walk' [p. 18]." Here I am reminded of a scene in Through the Looking Glass, the scene in which Humpty Dumpty explains to Alice the meaning of the poem "Jabberwocky." This is right after Humpty has completed his argument to Alice that if there are 365 days in a year on one of which she receives birthday presents, there are 364 days on which she might receive unbirthday presents... and that shows that there are three hundred and sixty-four days when you might get un-birthday presents--"

"Certainly," said Alice.

"And only one for birthday presents, you know. There's glory for you!"

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory'", Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't till I tell you. I meant there's a nice knock-down argument

for you!"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument,'" Alice objected.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean--neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you <u>can</u> make words mean so many things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master--that's all."

Roger Holmes, in an article entitled "The Philosopher's Alice in Wonderland" (1959), asks "May we make our words mean whatever we choose them to mean?...Do we have an obligation to past usage? In one sense words are our masters, or communication would be impossible. In another, we are the masters; otherwise there could be no poetry [p. 137]."

The paradox arises. It is impossible to locate meaning in either of the places we might expect to find it. Part of the problem, as one might suspect of any problem of this sort, is in the way the question is put. "Where is the meaning?" assumes something about meaning, that it is actual rather than virtual. That is, meaning is not <u>in</u> anything because it is not a thing--not a quantity or a quality at all, but rather a happening, an event necessarily connected to someone

who realizes it in a quite literal sense of real-ize, to make real. The meaning of any text or utterance is inseparable from those to whom it means, who breathe meaning into it.

This conception of the nature of meaning offers what I would call a "phenomenological-pragmatic" perspective on meaning. It is phenomenological because it puts the essence of meaning in the experience of events, specifically in the human experience. (Phenomenology may be defined as a branch of philosophy which takes the human experience as its object of concern, to the disregard, though without denial of, objective reality or subjective response.) The perspective is pragmatic because it focuses on the effect of text. Text is meaningful in the degree as it is assimilable with past experience, as it lends itself to the connections with something else which Bartlett found so important.

William James, in his very influential book, Pragmatism (1907), advanced the following conception of truth: "The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process.... [p. 133]." With very little distortion, we can turn this statement into a pragmatic definition of the meaning of text:

> The meaning of a text is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Meaning happens to a text. It becomes meaningful, is made meaningful by the event of reading. Its meaning is in fact an event, a process.

And we can say that teaching reading is facilitating that process.

Like all processes, meaning is easier to understand by experience than by description. Read the following "poem" (actually, a passage constructed by Dooling and Lackman (1971) for experimental purposes); notice the exact time at which the meaning "occurs" to you.

?

With hocked gems financing him,
Our hero bravely defied all scornful laughter
That tried to prevent his scheme.

Your eyes deceive, he had said;
An egg, not a table
Correctly typifies this unexplored planet.

Now three sturdy sisters sought proof,
Forging along sometimes through calm vastness
Yet more often over turbulent peaks and valleys.

Days became weeks,
As many doubters spread
Fearful rumors about the edge.

At last from nowhere,
Welcome winged creatures appeared
Signifying momentous success.

If you read the poem over a few times, there seems to come a point very like what Roger Brown (1958) calls the "click of comprehension." Suddenly, you know the meaning. For some, the word "Columbus" abruptly comes to mind to replace the question mark for a title. Why? The best explanation, I think, is that some connection between some word or phrase

("An egg, not a table" or "Rumors about the edge" or simply "the edge") and some unspecfiable prior experience or knowledge is created by the event of reading. What cued you to the meaning? Are you struck by what a different poem this seems to be, once the meaning does occur? Once it was nonsense, then it made complete sense. What does this suggest about reading and how we might teach it? If you had not had the proper interpretive framework with which to make sense of the poem, it would have remained the mystery it at first seemed to be. The direct, and hopefully clear, implication here is that to make meaning happen for students, we must do everything necessary to clarify and stabilize the framework they possess by which what they read will become meaningful. Otherwise, mystery rather than meaning will prevail.

We are now squarely facing the question of practice. Meaning happens, and to teach reading we must make reading meaningful. Dooling and Lackman (1971) found, not surprisingly, that a thematic title ("Christopher Columbus Discovering America") seemed to facilitate comprehension and recall of their highly metaphorical passage. As Kintgen (1978) suggests, "it does so by actuating what we know about history, by encouraging an interaction between the linguistic material and information stored in our memories [p. 766]." I think information storage is an unfortunate phrase, but the point is well

taken. (It might be more accurate to think of an interaction (Bartlett's "connection") between what is given (the text) and something the reader knows, believes, feels, or has experienced.)

One of the most successful ways I have found to get the connections to happen in teaching reading (to make reading meaningful) is to get readers involved in decisions about text. In a limited but useful way, I think and try to get students to think of text as confirming, disconfirming, novel, or quizzical. As they read, I ask students to put marks in the margin of the text: ✓, -, +, or ? to indicate where the text confirms what they previously knew or felt, disconfirms or contradicts what they previously knew, is novelly interesting or adds a new dimension to their understanding, or raises an interesting question. These notes (which, I would argue, is what many good readers are making when they underline or make comments in the margin of what they are reading) serve later as the focus of post-reading discussion.

But naturally there is a prior step. If meaning lies in or is realized in the connection between written material and the reader's understanding, it becomes necessary that the reader's understanding be very clear if meaning is to occur. We can make reading meaningful as we can facilitate the connections on which meaning is built. (The questions of

how what we read means and of what we might do to make reading meaningful seem to have almost completely coalesced now.)

The practical basis of this facilitation is in the art of asking questions, questions which serve two purposes: First, to make obvious the dimensions of the reader which are the "something else" Bartlett is talking about connecting with the "something given." Second, to habituate the reader into an interrogative frame of mind with which to approach reading.

Unfortunately, the art of asking questions, of getting readers to ask good questions, is not well practiced, generally. Frank Guzak reported in the Reading Teacher in 1967 that fewer than 15% of teacher questions could be said to require any depth of thought by the child. Guzak suggested that "reading series should clearly spell out their comprehension structures in such a way that classroom teachers can have some clear insights into their task in comprehension development [p. 233]." A study done ten years later by Mary Woodburn (1978) revealed that out of twelve basal series surveyed, only one includes suggestions of questions requiring of children the one thing needful for comprehension--thinking, beyond a literal level. (The singular exception is Bill Martin and Peggy Brogan's Sounds of Language program, published by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.)

It is not as if we have no idea of alternatives to what Guzak called "inanity." What Mary Woodburn and Frank Guzak

and a host of others in between are asking for is available. One of the best sources on the topic, in fact, was published in 1966, one year before Guzak's study. It is Norris Sander's (1966) Classroom Questions: What Kinds? Basing his work on Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (1956) Sanders identified seven levels of questioning: 1) Memory, or recognition or recall of information, 2) Translation, or hanging information into a different form; 3) Interpretation, or discovering relationships among ideas, facts, definitions, and values; 4) Application, or solving a realistic problem requiring identification of the issue and the selection and use of appropriate generalizations and skills; 5) Analysis, or solving a problem in light of conscious knowledge of the parts and forms of thinking; 6) Synthesis, or solving a problem that requires original, creative thinking; and 7) Evaluation, or judgment of good or bad, right or wrong, according to standards designated by the student.

Like meaning, questioning at various levels is easier to understand by experience than by description. Using a "story" with which you are undoubtedly familiar, I will pose questions for discussion based on Sanders' suggestions. This is not to suggest that questions most properly belong after reading; on the contrary, I can't emphasize strongly enough the importance of prereading questions which mobilize and

clarify understandings by which the connections which are the basis of meaning may be made. Perhaps, though, some of the following questions will help establish some new connections for this story and cause a new event for you.

The "story" I have in mind is actually a nursery rhyme, the first verse of "Jack and Jill," and principally the first half of that verse. In some editions, this rhyme has as many as seventeen verses, but one verse will serve my purpose here:

Jack and Jill
Went up the hill,
  To fetch a pail of water;
Jack fell down
And broke his crown,
  And Jill came tumbling after.

1. What did Jack and Jill do?

This is a question of memory, asking for mere recall of information, an unfortunately typical question. Little if any thought is required to answer it.

2. Could you put this event into different words? Close your eyes and picture the event, then describe what you see.

This is a question requiring translation, asking you to change the information from the first question into a different form. This requires at least a low level of thought.

3. Why do you think Jack and Jill went after water? Why did they take only one pail?

These are questions of interpretation, requiring you to see relationships in the information given. All higher level questions, according to Sanders, are refinements of the intellectual processes required in interpretation.

4. Do you think it reasonable to go up a hill after water? Is that where you would go?

These questions require application, and now we get into thinking which requires justification aside from the text.

5. Would it be reasonable to suggest that Jack and Jill have other motives in going up the hill?

This is a question of analysis since it requires a logical deduction: if not water, then what?

6. What are some things this couple might do to avoid suspicion in their behavior?

This question requires creativity and originality. A simple problem is posed by the question, the solution to which lies in a synthesis of the content of the text with the common sense of the reader.

7. Do you think Jack and Jill should have gone up the hill? Does the outcome of their misadventure, revealed in the second part of the verse, provide a moral?

Here the reader is asked to make a judgment according to standards which he or she can specify.

The point of these questions is not to direct your comprehension by constraining your thinking but to facilitate comprehension by deliberately asking for divergence and creativity. The connections of which meaning is made arise out of creativity. Questions which call for unique thought are the pivots on which the effort after meaning rests and around which the event of meaning turns.

William James (1958) had an interesting and insightful definition of teaching which we might take as the object of good questions:

> In teaching, you must simply work your pupil into such a state of interest in what (he is learning or reading) that every other object of attention is banished from his mind [p. 25].

I suggest that good questions can do that, can build the cusiosity and interest which might keep reading from being quite so tough while at the same time making it much more interesting.

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